The Unknown Unknowns: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for Graduate Students from the Perspective of Postsecondary Administration

Debbie L. Hahs-Vaughn, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA
Charles D. Dziuban, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA
Cynthia Y. Young, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

Graduate education is influenced by trends and events that are political, economic, social, technological, and demographic. These materialize into challenges and opportunities for graduate students, an overview of these is provided in the paper along with recommendations for navigating graduate education, written from the perspective of individuals who have successfully completed graduate school, who have served (or continue to serve) in faculty positions, and who can offer advice via their roles in administration. As expressed through the paper, the opportunities outweigh the challenges, particularly if you are deliberate in your roadmap, relentless in your quest to be informed, are wise enough to know what you don’t know and ask questions (lots of questions) until you know the things that were, simply, not on your horizon.

Keywords: Challenges, Graduate Education, Graduate Students, Postsecondary Administration

INTRODUCTION

There are things in life that we know and of course, there are things we don’t know—some of them essential for our well-being and others not nearly as relevant. However, by far the most important category in life represents those things that we don’t know but remain unaware that they are vital to our success. In many respects these unknown unknowns have the greatest impact in graduate education and are the ones addressed in this paper. This is not a report on the state of graduate education (readers interested in this may wish to review the latest report of the Council of Graduate Schools, Graduate Education 2020 (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009)) nor is it an empirical study of factors that relate to success in graduate education—see

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for instance (e.g., Gupta & Turek, 2015; Herrera & Blair, 2015; Johnson-Motoyama & Mitchell, 2014). Rather, this paper is intended to provide current and prospective graduate students with an overview of challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for navigating the educational landscape, written from the perspective of individuals who have successfully completed graduate school, who have served (or continue to serve) in faculty positions, and who can offer advice via their roles in administration.

**CHALLENGES**

We’ll start with the bad news first. Graduate education is a journey laden with challenges that are not unsurmountable, but challenges none-the-less. The more aware you are of these challenges, the less bumpy the road to and through graduate school. We will outline what we believe to be some of the biggest challenges in graduate education, however this is (unfortunately) not an exhaustive list.

1. **Funding Graduate Education:** Whether you are funding your education or whether you are receiving aid from your institution, the question of how this is going to get paid is often one of the first reality checks. Graduate school is not cheap for graduate students, and it is not cheap for institutions. The average total price (including room and board, books, transportation, and personal expenses) of a master’s degree in 2011-2012 was about $23,000. In comparison, a research doctorate was $36,600 and a professional doctorate (e.g., medicine or law) was $48,900 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). State funding for public higher education institutions has declined from 60% in the 1980s to below 40% (The economics of higher education, 2012). Influenced in part by the decreased state funding, the last few decades have seen dramatic increases in the cost of tuition for in- and out-of-state students (The economics of higher education, 2012). Funding is one of the biggest barriers to succeeding in graduate school (Lariviere, 2013). If you are a funded graduate student, you are both fortunate and (likely) broke. Graduate students who receive an assistantship are usually either teaching or conducting research as part of their funding package. About 2/3 of doctorate recipients have an assistantship or fellowship/dissertation grant as their primary financial support (Hoffer, 2006) with teaching or research assistantships being the major source of financial aid (National Science Foundation, 2015). The compensation beyond tuition reimbursement is often insufficient to actually live on. Graduate students that are not able to supplement their funding with additional scholarships or fellowships often have to take out student loans, take on other employment, deplete savings, and other creative strategies (Cassuto, 2011). For federal financial aid purposes, all graduate students are independent—which means that eligibility for need-based financial aid depends only on the graduate student’s income and assets (College Board, 2013). In 2012-2013, graduate students received over $53 billion in student aid. Of this amount, about two-thirds (63%) was in the form of federal loans (College Board, 2013). In 2011-2012, about 70% of graduate students received financial aid with individuals receiving doctorate degrees receiving proportionally more aid (88% for professional doctorates, 82% for research doctorates) as compared to individuals enrolled in master’s degrees (69%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The field of study, part-time versus full-time attendance, and type of institution are all influencers (e.g., health doctorate field of study, full-time attendance, and attendance at a for-profit institution equates to higher proportions of financial aid) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
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